

Perceived Difficulties in Group Presentations: Action Research as an Intervention

Michelle Kawamura

School of Economics, Ritsumeikan University, Shiga, Japan

Email: michelle@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp

Abstract—In this research, the researcher attempted to understand learners' experiences and attitudes during the completion of group presentation projects as part of university English as foreign language courses. Based on the concept of education action research, modified action steps were implemented to explore possible problems, reflections, and improvements during the process among 58 learners at a university in the western part of Japan. At the beginning of a 15-week semester course, a pre-questionnaire was conducted and issues were further explored through class discussion as an intervention for presentation improvement. A post-questionnaire was administered after a teacher-led peer discussion, self-reflection, and final presentation. Results of the pre- and post-questionnaires indicated a significant change in learners' attitudes after interventional steps.

Index Terms—peer interaction, presentation skills, self-reflection

I. INTRODUCTION

Presentation skills learned and practiced in English as foreign language courses have become requirements for various majors at many universities [1] (Verdejo & Guinda, 2015). The process of presentation development by a group is understood to have a positive influence on learner development [2], [3] (Storch, 2007; Barnard & Campbell, 2005). Therefore, many English as foreign language courses teach and include group presentation projects as part of their compulsory English courses. Many difficulties are faced by learners during presentation preparation and delivery. Previous studies investigated the difficulties that cause low performance during presentations and were focused on each individual's self-perceived anxiety, such as shyness, fear of speaking in public, and self confidence [4] (Akindele & Trennepohl, 2014). However, individual perceptions of difficulties while working in group projects emphasizing particular tasks also need exploration in various environments and in each unique program.

Thus, the researcher focused on how individuals perceive difficulties in the tasks undertaken in the formation of a group presentation. Utilizing action research as an intervention, this study aimed to determine whether intervention steps affect the outcomes of

difficulties perceived by individuals completing a group presentation project.

II. BRIEF LITERATURE

A. Presentation Skills

Engaging in oral communication in English and effectively delivering a presentation have become fundamental skills to take part in various areas in our society, such as global business [5] (Bollinger, 2015). Moreover, English presentation skills have become of greater importance in private and non-private organizations because of the rise in international economic development. In the process of preparing and delivering a group presentation, group members experience teamwork, peer feedback, special content, and discourse that can assist their language learning as well as non-verbal communication skills [1] (Verdejo & Guinda, 2015). In the English as foreign language courses offered in numerous countries, English oral presentation skills are believed to be essential for personal growth and future professional advancement of university graduates [6] (Alwi & Sidhu, 2013). These skills are also considered lifelong learning tools necessary for individual progress and success in various social contexts [7] (Simona, 2015). Proliferating across many disciplines in higher education, the need for English oral presentation skills is recognized, and it has become a cardinal genre among educators [1] (Verdejo & Guinda, 2015).

B. Educational Action Research

Teachers, like their pupils, are constantly learning and developing better strategies to reach their goals. As far back as the 1940s, the desire to conduct research for the purpose of solving social problems triggered Kurt Lewin to develop the theory of action research [8], [9] (Smith, 2001; Mills, 2011). This learning-as-problem-solving in the teaching environment is now known as education action research. This kind of research requires major educational professional responsibility [10] (Glanz, 2015, p. 4) in that it investigates a problem and then seeks solutions or plans a course of action from data gathered and analyzed [10] (Glanz 2015, p. 8). The steps in education action research, planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, allow an understanding of the problem [11] (Edwards & Burns, 2016). The action in education action research often involves intervention so that classroom issues can be explored and understood [12] (Burns, 2013).

C. Peer Interaction

Peer discussion, peer collaboration, and peer assessment are forms of peer interaction suggested to have positive influences on learner development [2], [3] (Storch, 2007; Barnard & Campbell, 2005). The concept of peer interaction is also a form of collaborative learning, influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) social construct wherein learning occurs through social interaction and collaboration among peers. A study of small group peer interactions while completing projects found that individual contributions in peer groups lead to higher learning quality [13] (Violet, Varuras, Sato, & Khosa, 2017). In addition, peer interaction is a form of active learning. A study conducted in a biology course applied the peer interaction concept and concluded it is not only the group activity itself that improves learning; peer interaction plays a crucial role in promoting individual abilities to explain their understanding [14] (Linton, Farmer, & Peterson, 2014).

III. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to understand students' self-perceived difficulties during the preparation and delivery of presentations in English and to allow students to identify problems and improve presentations through peer discussion and self-reflection. The research questions were:

- Did student perception of the English language group presentation preparation and delivery process change after intervention (teacher-led peer discussion, self-reflection, and interview)?
- If there was a change, was it positive or negative, and was it significant?

IV. METHODOLOGY

Action research is a systematic inquiry designed to better understand a teacher's practice to improve the quality and effectiveness of classroom instructions [15] (Mertler, 2012a). The primary goal for this study was to understand participant experiences in the process of completing a presentation in English, from the preparation steps to the final delivery, and how perceived problems were overcome and presentation skills were improved. Mertler's [16] (2012b) cyclical model of action research was customized for this study (Fig. 1).

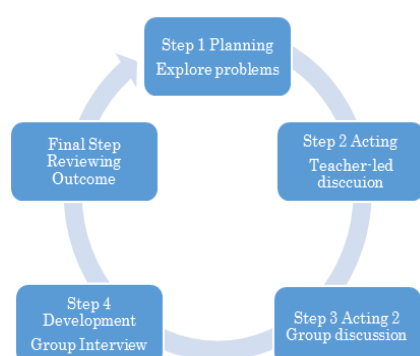


Figure 1. The cyclical model of action research adapted from Mertler (2012).

A. Participants

Study participants comprised 58 second-year students of Economics who were enrolled in a compulsory English class taught by a native English-speaker at a university in western Japan. One-third were female, and all were upper intermediate English learners as shown by the results of a placement test administered by the School of Economics.

This action research was conducted using three methods to understand participants' self-perceived experiences in the presentation project. First, using retrospective pre-questionnaire, participants are asked to share the attitude they had toward the group presentation projects in their previous English as foreign language course. This questionnaire posed 6 questions, requiring the participant to rate the difficulty of various tasks as 1 (very difficult), 2 (difficult), or 3 (not difficult). Second, a teacher-led discussion posed a writing form with open-ended questions based on the pre-questionnaire to further explore participants' perceived difficulties. Third, this writing form was used for peer discussion and self-reflection. A few weeks into the presentation-building process, participants were interviewed in their groups to measure progress. During the last week of the course, a post-questionnaire, which posed the same questions as the pre-questionnaire was administered.

V. PROCEDURE

The cyclical procedure was followed in two compulsory English courses held at the School of Economics during a 15-week semester. The cyclical procedure included 5 steps: planning to explore the problems using the pre-questionnaire, a teacher-led class discussion to explore the problems in depth, a peer group discussion for communication and interaction, and group interviews to reflect on the learning process. A post-questionnaire followed. The final results were presented in class so that participants could reflect on the presentation process and enter the second semester with these experiences and perceptions.

A. Step 1. Planning: Explore the Problems Using a Pre-questionnaire.

During the first week of class, a pre-questionnaire was administered to reveal participants' self-perceived experiences during the group presentation project process, including preparation and delivery of the presentation. This step is vital because the results will be analyzed for planning the next step. In this study, all participants have completed their first year English presentations in their compulsory courses prior to entering this course; therefore, the answers to the questionnaire are expected to be based on participants' pre-existing knowledge and their personal experiences.

Participants answered each question by assigning one of the three choices describing difficulty. The answers revealed that the majority of participants felt the process would be difficult to very difficult. The average across all participants was less than 2 for all questions (Table I). These results indicate that participants encountered difficulties during the presentation process in their

previous English courses. The researcher can assume that participants entered their second-year English course with the same perceptions for their upcoming presentation project.

TABLE I. AVERAGE OF RATINGS FOR TASK DIFFICULTY. EACH TASK WAS RATED AS 1 (VERY DIFFICULT), 2 (DIFFICULT), OR 3 (NOT DIFFICULT).

	Description	Mean	SD
a	Working in groups	1.34	0.55
b	Doing research	1.83	0.68
c	Presentation writing	1.64	0.61
d	Organizing presentation	1.71	0.46
e	Making PowerPoint	1.41	0.5
f	Presenting in class	1.45	0.5

Details, shown in Table II, reveal the distribution of the ratings. The highest numbers among these answers were drawn out for their significance. The greatest number of participants perceived that working in groups would be very difficult in all tasks. This distribution is important for the next step.

TABLE II. RATING DISTRIBUTION (N=58)

		Very Difficult	Difficult	Not Difficult
a	Working in groups	40	16	2
b	Doing research	19	30	9
c	Presentation writing	25	29	4
d	Organizing presentation	17	41	0
e	Making PowerPoint	34	24	0
f	Presenting in class	32	26	0

B. Step 2. Action: Teacher-led Discussion.

A class discussion was held during the second week of class after questionnaire results were tabulated. Questionnaires were returned to the participants along with an open-ended form on which to record their feelings in more detail during the discussion. Based on these statements, the researcher formed the teacher-led discussion and focused on the tasks that most participants rated very difficult. The discussion started with an introduction of the purpose of this study, and participants were encouraged to discuss their perceived difficulties in the group presentation preparation and delivery process. About 10 minutes were given for discussion and recording statements, but the tasks more heavily emphasized took 15 to 20 minutes to complete. Participants were asked to write in English and in Japanese if they could not explain their answers in English. Example statements follow (translated and corrected for grammar):

- Participant A: It was very difficult to work in a group with new classmates. I am shy, and I usually don't start talking in a group.
- Participant B: Some classmates in the group didn't help making PowerPoint slides.

- Participant C: Last year, my classmates didn't know who was to do what part of the research. We each did the same research. It was confusing.
- Participant D: I practiced many times, but I got very nervous during the actual presentation.
- Participant E: We couldn't arrange the PowerPoint slides, so we just did our own part. The presentation last year was very bad because some of my group members and I had similar PowerPoint slides on the same research.
- Participant F: Our group didn't decide who should do which part of the research, so we found many similar sources, and we had the same information.

C. Step 3. Reflection: Group Discussion

At this stage, participants were divided into groups of 4 or 5. Prior to giving the presentation assignment, participants were given 30 minutes to discuss the statements made in response to the open-ended questions. They were reminded to reflect on successes and failures during the group presentation projects completed the prior academic year. The researcher acted as a facilitator and observed the discussions, after which each group wrote an outline describing their responsibilities and tasks for this group presentation project. The outlines were collected for the next step.

D. Step 4. Group Interview

Participants were asked to make appointments and visit the teacher in the researcher's office for short interviews during weeks 8 and 9. Groups were asked about their progress based on the outlines collected in the previous step. The basic interview questions were:

1. How is your group progressing?
2. Have you fulfilled your part of the tasks?
3. What are some difficulties you face now?
4. Does your group have good communication?

After the group interview, participants were asked to give yes or no answers to the following questions:

1. Our group is making good progress.
2. Our group has good communication.
3. I have fulfilled my part of the tasks.
4. My classmates in the group have fulfilled their part of the tasks

The results are shown in Table III.

TABLE III. DISTRIBUTION OF INTERVIEW (N=58)

	Yes	No
a. Our group is making good progress	46	12
b. Our group has good communication	51	7
c. I have fulfilled my part of the tasks	38	20
d. My classmates in the group have fulfilled their part of the tasks	43	15

E. Final Step: Post-questionnaire

During weeks 12 and 13, participants completed their preparations and delivered the presentations in class. After all presentations, the post-questionnaire was administered. Results are shown in Table IV. The actual number of distribution is indicated in Table V.

TABLE IV. AVERAGE OF RATING FOR TASK DIFFICULTY. EACH TASK WAS RATED AS 1 (VERY DIFFICULT), 2 (DIFFICULT), OR 3 (NOT DIFFICULT).

	Description	Mean	SD
a	Working in groups	2.24	0.71
b	Doing research	2.02	0.69
c	Presentation writing	2.12	0.65
d	Organizing presentation	2.21	0.55
e	Making PowerPoint	1.97	0.67
f	Presenting in class	1.93	0.67

TABLE V. RATING DISTRIBUTION (N=58)

		Very Difficult	Difficult	Not Difficult
a	Working in groups	10	26	22
b	Doing research	14	31	13
c	Presentation writing	9	33	16
d	Organizing presentation	4	38	16
e	Making PowerPoint	17	32	9
f	Presenting in class	15	32	11

Questionnaire results were shared with the participants during the last week of the course whereupon changes in participants' perceived difficulties and attitudes were discussed.

VI. RESULTS OF PRE-POST QUESTIONNAIRE AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

This action research explored the perceived difficulties in preparing and delivering a group presentation before and after a teacher-led class discussion, peer-discussion, and group interviews.

TABLE VI. DIFFERENCES IN MEANS BETWEEN PRE- AND POST-QUESTIONNAIRES.

	da	db	dc	dd	de	df
Mean	0.9	0.19	0.48	0.5	0.55	0.48
SD	0.89	0.44	0.63	0.6	0.57	0.54
t-value	7.65	3.3	5.85	6.35	7.41	6.84

(d=difference; a~f=task categories)

Table VI shows the differences between the means and standard deviations both before and after Step 2, 3, and 4 in this action research. The t-values were calculated to determine significance. Table VI shows that for all tasks, the mean increased, indicating that participants perceived the group presentation project to be less difficult at the end of this course. The t-values, all greater than 2, suggest that the differences are statistically significant at conventional significance levels. Significance is typically

chosen at one of the two or three conventional levels. These results are indication that this kind of intervention, using various steps to explore expected problems and attitudes before embarking on a new project, affected the outcomes. In this case, the intervention was applied to the preparation and delivery of a presentation in English by a group of students for whom English is a foreign language.

A. Discussion

Presentation skills have been recognized as vital English communication skills for learners of English as a foreign language [1] (Verdejo & Guinda, 2015). The researcher's intention was to apply modified action research steps to explore participants' perceptions of preparing and delivering a group presentation.

The steps and methods applied in this research allowed participants to reflect on previous projects and share experiences with peers before beginning a new presentation project. In the pre-questionnaire, answers were based on participants' prior experiences with a group presentation project. A large number (40/58) felt it was very difficult to work in a group, and 41 of them felt it was difficult to organize a presentation. The number of participants with these two sentiments were largest from among the tasks addressed, and this was also reflected in written responses during a teacher-led discussion. Participants frequently stated that it was difficult to communicate with peers in terms of sharing the work and making progress. The lack of communication, hesitation to clarify workload, and reluctance to take charge and remind members of their tasks made the group presentation project difficult. Many participants said they had difficulties in knowing which part to research and which PowerPoint slides to make to fulfill their part in the group presentation project. This indicates a need for more communication.

Discussing perceived difficulties and sharing experiences allowed an initial communication prior to taking a new presentation project assignment. This group interaction promoted participants' abilities to explain their understandings [14] (Linton *et al.*, 2014) and clarify their thoughts, thus contributing to a more effective collaboration.

Group interviews served as reminders of the difficulties discussed, and each participant could reflect on their own progress in the new assignment. Though the interview results were not factored into the study, the significance of this step is believed to have contributed to participant motivation in the last phase of the group presentation project, based on observations of group interactions in class.

Post-questionnaire results showed that participants changed their perceptions and attitudes about their performances working with peers and delivering a presentation, showing decreased levels of perceived difficulty for every task, particularly in working with other classmates, originally perceived to be very difficult. This result indicates that interventions implemented at the beginning of the course can yield a positive change in participants' perceived difficulties and attitudes.

VII. CONCLUSION

This research is a fundamental study which amalgamate action and reflection to explore the perceptions of preparation and delivery of presentations in English as foreign language courses of learners with 2 years or 4 semesters of compulsory English courses requiring presentations at a Japanese university. Prior to this action research, little or no intervention in this process has been reported. Learners entered new courses expecting many difficulties based on previous courses. In these courses, this particular set of cyclical actions were taken to help learners individually and as group members in conducting group presentation projects in future courses.

Presentation skills in English as foreign language courses have been recognized as crucial to target language acquisition [1] (Verdejo & Guinda, 2015). Presentation skills are taught in most English as foreign language courses, and efforts to improve these courses for the learners is continuous. These courses should incorporate interventions to understand learners' difficulties in the group presentation process so that improved learning results can be reached. It is recommended that intervention steps be carefully designed to suit the course depending on the level of English proficiency, class size, and other vital factors.

APPENDIX A : QUESTIONER

Name

Date

Questionnaire about the group presentation project

Dear students, this questionnaire is to understand your perceived degree of difficulty in your previous group presentation projects.

Please rank the following statements by checking the answer best describes your feelings 1=Very difficult 2=Difficult 3=Not difficult

1. Working with my classmates
 - ☐ Very difficult (1)
 - ☐ Difficult (2)
 - ☐ Not difficult (3)
2. Doing research on the presentation topic
 - ☐ Very difficult (1)
 - ☐ Difficult (2)
 - ☐ Not difficult (3)
3. Writing the presentation
 - ☐ Very difficult (1)
 - ☐ Difficult (2)
 - ☐ Not difficult (3)
4. Organizing the presentation
 - ☐ Very difficult (1)
 - ☐ Difficult (2)
 - ☐ Not difficult (3)
5. Making Powerpoint slides for presentation

- ☐ Very difficult (1)
 - ☐ Difficult (2)
 - ☐ Not difficult (3)
6. Presenting in front of all classmates
 - ☐ Very difficult (1)
 - ☐ Difficult (2)
 - ☐ Not difficult (3)

Discussion Form

Name

Date

Dear students, please write your concerns/opinions or any statement following the questionnaire.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.
- f.

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Michelle Kawamura received her PhD in Education in 2011 from the United States. She is a professor in the College of Economics of Ritsumeikan University, Japan. Her research interests lie in various fields of education. Previously conducted researches include cross-cultural awareness, e-learning, perceptions in EFL teaching and learning.